

How does popular culture make use of Classics?

George Brettle

O*mnibus* runs an annual essay competition, the Gladstone Prize. This year's winning entry, by George Brettle of Oundle School, asks a question of interest to all of us who research, teach, or study the ancient world.

Popular culture is a very broad term but I will adopt a general definition: the collection of ideas that permeates our everyday lives. This broad definition can encompass different areas of life in Britain like entertainment, politics, fashion, and more. The term 'Classics' encompasses a whole wide range of topics from the Greek and Roman civilizations of about the eighth century B.C. to the fifth century A.D., from epic literature, such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, to the rhetorical flourishes of Cicero; from the grand architecture of the Parthenon, to the delicate black-figure pottery of Exekias. I could be talking about coins or architecture, philosophy or law, but I will limit myself here to examining Classical literature.

Many aspects of popular culture show the influence of Classical literature. For children, the 'Percy Jackson' series by Rick Riordan and the tales of the Gauls Asterix and Obelix provide a first encounter with versions of ancient gods or people. For adults, the Robert Harris *Imperium* trilogy shows that the literary world seems to find that an audience of general readers might find it relevant and interesting to read about the Classical world. It is the same in the film world. Films such as *300* or *Troy*, though they lack historical or textual accuracy, entice people to engage with Classical stories and find relevance in them. Documentaries on the television or podcasts by leading academics such as Mary Beard or Daisy Dunn also show how much we can learn from the Classical world and ensure that Mary Beard – now Dame Mary – is a 'household name': in the recent BBC series *Civilisations* one of the presenters was Mary Beard. The fact that there are films and books to do with the Classics, aimed not at an educated elite but at a general audience, has in turn made popular culture interested in Classics.

Access to Classics is another point. As a nation, we have been at the forefront of Classical scholarship and archaeology for many generations. Although that does not

necessarily mean that our popular culture is still interested in Classics, it is hard in this country to miss references to the Classical world, whether it be visiting the British Museum (which receives almost six million visitors a year), Hadrian's Wall, or the newly opened Temple of Mithras in London. Therefore it is clear to see that popular culture is very much exposed to Classics and the Classical era.

Classics – beyond the Mediterranean

One less obvious reason why popular culture is still interested is because of the impact that Classics has had not only on Europe, and in particular the history and culture of Italy and Greece, but also an impact on some of the wider cultures of the world. Take one well-known figure from Classical mythology: Heracles, a versatile Classical character who played a part in the inter-cultural intellectual movement of ideas, gods, and people that occurred in the ancient world. Though the Roman adoption of Greek Heracles as Roman Hercules is well known, Heracles may also have travelled further afield. For example in Mahayana Buddhism, there is a very similar deity called Vajrapani who is often depicted with a Herculean club in paintings and statues (see right). He may have developed as Buddhism spread into areas that had also seen waves of Greek expansion from the time of Alexander the Great. Here you can see that the impact of Classics has stretched beyond the shores of the Mediterranean and also beyond the Classical era.

Classics and the world we live in now

One of the main reasons why popular culture is still interested in Classics is because lots of the issues and events that happened in the Classical era have such relevance to the world that we live in now. This has particular bearing on the political world. It is easy to see how this is the case:

columnists and journalists such as Peter Jones in the *Spectator* have noticed the acute similarities between the ancient and modern political climates. Natalie Haynes makes some astute comparisons of political figures with Roman Emperors: 'JFK was Titus, loved by the people, but destined to die young. Tony Blair was Augustus, master of spin'. Indeed, recently John McDonnell, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, was handing out copies of Cicero's *De Oratore* to the shadow cabinet about how to win arguments! Cicero of course is a figure that many politicians, such as Boris Johnson, the former foreign secretary, aspire to imitate. Cicero himself would not have been out of place in modern-day politics. He would have revelled in the Brexit referendum of 2016, negotiating and trying to appease the two camps.

Cicero had an impact on another important figure in our history: Winston Churchill. As portrayed in the recent film *Darkest Hour*, Churchill needed Cicero to guide him through the crisis of 1940. Why? This is because in 44–43 B.C. Cicero had to speak against Mark Antony in the *Philippics* to save the Republic when it needed Cicero most. Cicero of course in turn idealized Demosthenes in these *Philippics*; Demosthenes had spoken out against the machinations of Philip II of Macedon in the mid 4th century B.C. Both of these orators spoke at a time of crisis in their politics, and tried to rally the people behind them. What links Demosthenes and Cicero today to popular culture is that what really underpinned the debate was the eternal battle between good and evil, democracy and tyranny. The eternal battle between democracy and tyranny is what Churchill was speaking about in 1940 and this battle still resonates with the public today.

Tragic echoes

Another apt comparison is the ending of Margaret Thatcher's political career. The poll tax of 1989 was arguably when she experienced *peripeteia* – a concept from Greek tragedy meaning reversal of fortune – as the poll tax was the catalyst for the end of the Thatcher dynasty, an ambitious policy that brought down the prime minis-

ter. Other aspects of Greek tragedy also resonate today. For example, in Kamila Shamsie's fascinating new book, *Home Fires*, the story of Sophocles' *Antigone* is re-imagined for a contemporary world by setting it against the backdrop of Islamic extremism and whether or not we should bury those who die fighting against the state. Burial of the dead is of course also one of the key themes of Sophocles' play, and Shamsie's version offers a fine example of how somebody has made Classics and in particular tragedy relevant to the modern day world. When in 2013 there were protests against the funeral house in Worcester, Massachusetts that had agreed to bury the body of Boston Bomber, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, *Antigone* was again evoked by journalists who found parallels in this tragic modern tale to the tragic tale of *Antigone* and her siblings.

It is interesting that so much Greek tragedy has stood the test of time. Many more recent books and plays are no longer widely read in schools or put on in performance. Yet Greek tragedy is very much alive today with many schools and theatre production companies putting on productions. Greek tragedy has universal themes, concerning human emotions and motivations, that do not apply only to the time in which they were written. Like Shakespeare, Greek tragedy can speak to any time, not just to its own specific surrounding political climate.

For many people, the Classical era is one to aspire to as a time of human achievement and progress. Not really until the industrial revolution did the world experience such a change as it did during the Classical era. In ancient Athens, democracy was born; the Greek world produced some of the earliest mathematicians who still have an impact on our lives today – such as the 'eureka' uttered by Archimedes when he realized that the volume of displaced water equalled the volume of the mass that had displaced the water.

'Neo-classical' movements in previous times such as the Renaissance have sought to establish a link between the present day and the past. One theme that links these times with our own is an obsession with beauty.

In the Riace Warriors, fifth-century B.C. Greek statues found off the coast of Sicily, it is clear to see that these figures are 'air-

brushed' and the imperfections that you would find on a body have been removed to create a 'perfect' human form. For example the central channel of the spine is deeper than you would normally see on a real human, improving the line of the back. Perhaps, as art historian Nigel Spivey suggests, the Greek sculptors wanted to impress upon the viewer the sheer beauty of a body whatever the cost in terms of loss of 'realism'.

In the present day we might be said to do the same. We air-brush and add filters to our photos, we use makeup to remove imperfections, and we do not mind if we lose realism as a result. We aspire to the image projected by the Riace Warriors – the perfect, if unrealistic, man. That aspiration was true in the Classical era and it is true now. Therefore, it is no wonder that people want to aspire to this era, and these aspirations tend to mean or lead to an interest in the Classical world.

In conclusion, there are many reasons why popular culture is still interested in Classics. We are at least in some ways similar to the Romans and the Greeks; many of the problems or questions that we encounter they also encountered in their own era. Themes in Classical literature helped to shape our present-day literature, and when you examine ancient works, you learn a perspective on life that does not only apply to the Classical world.

Therefore, it is pertinent for our popular culture to examine the past and learn something from it. Essentially we are still interested because Classics is still relevant today. As Natalie Haynes succinctly puts it, 'Classics have informed so much of our lives – our politics, our laws, our history, our culture, our language'.